

LETTERS FROM READERS

The FBI and Mr. Gersh

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

The article "The Day the FBI Came to Our House," which appeared in the January 1952 issue of COMMENTARY, has been brought to my attention. Frankly, I was surprised to see such an obvious and intentional attempt to hold the FBI up to ridicule being printed in your magazine.

You, of course, know, as does the public in general, that the FBI has been given definite responsibilities under Congressional enactments and presidential directives to seek facts, through investigation, which pertain to violations of the law or relate to the internal security of the country. We have always attempted to discharge these responsibilities in an efficient and straightforward manner. The overwhelming cooperation which the public has given us by voluntarily furnishing information has made it possible to bring our investigations to expeditious conclusions. In many cases they have served to remove suspicion from innocent persons falsely accused.

You can appreciate, I know, that in carrying out our responsibilities as an investigative agency, we conduct thousands of interviews with private citizens throughout the country each day. Time after time citizens communicate with us or call at our offices to volunteer information which they feel relates to matters within the jurisdiction of the FBI.

In connection with the interview with Mrs. Gersh, it was believed that she might possess information pertaining to a case under investigation and our agents called on her, as they would call on any other citizen under similar circumstances, to solicit her cooperation in furnishing whatever information she might have. The interview was of a routine nature and she talked to the agents on a voluntary basis. Had she or Mr. Gersh so desired, they most certainly could have declined to be interviewed. They not only did not do so but, on the contrary, did discuss pertinent matters with the interviewing agents.

In the light of these facts, it is difficult to understand why Mr. Gersh chose to distort the circumstances of the interview in such a way

that the agents were portrayed as sinister individuals, and that he, his wife, and child were pictured as being subjected to an "unhealthy," as he calls it, experience.

I think that it is very evident from a review of the article that Mr. Gersh clearly intended to give an exaggerated and unfair account of the interview. I am surprised that, as editor of a responsible publication, you did not make inquiry in the interest of ascertaining the facts before you printed the article.

JOHN EDGAR HOOVER
Director

Federal Bureau of Investigation
Washington, D. C.

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

The article Mr. Hoover objects to was not written "to hold the FBI up to ridicule." It was, I hope, a piece of reportage—not only of events, but of the effects of those events upon a family of normal, law-abiding citizens.

Mr. Hoover cites presidential directives and Congressional enactments which give him the right and duty to send his agents to see us. Fine. I agree. But a little criticism is a healthy thing, our grandfathers taught us.

Mr. Hoover says we talked to his agents voluntarily. Of course. We are good citizens and generally in agreement with the FBI's purposes. In general agreement, I said, and not in complete agreement—especially with its procedures.

I made several points in the article. One major point was that the agents who search out Communists have a duty to know what is Communism and what is a Communist. I consider myself a comparative expert on Communism and Communists. I got that way fighting them for many years, in the labor movement and elsewhere. It was our impression, confirmed by other experiences with FBI agents intent on similar tasks, that these men were not qualified to determine whether a man was or wasn't a Communist. Their parting words, as reported in the article, clinched this impression. So I, as a reporter and a citizen, have a duty to say so, without being accused of defaming the entire FBI.

Nor is Mr. Hoover competent to judge

whether his agents appeared "sinister." (His word—not mine.) That's a question of time, place, context, and cultural attitudes. He'll have to take our word for it that the occasion was not one of ease and good fellowship. I don't know how the FBI men felt about it, but we were a little frightened, a little apprehensive, a little confused. (Remember we didn't know what they wanted until quite a while after they had started their questioning.) The atmosphere was such that our son, four years old, sensed it and reacted. I tried to report that atmosphere. It was pertinent. If Mr. Hoover believes that a visit from the FBI, even to innocent people, is an occasion for jollity, he is mistaken. Maybe we've seen too many FBI movies. If that explains our reaction, Mr. Hoover's quarrel is with James Cagney, not with the Gershes.

One last word—Mr. Hoover and I do not disagree on the necessity of safeguarding our security and of fighting Communism. We may disagree on the methods to be used. Congressional authority *per se* does not cloak his procedures with absolute correctness. Nor, to reiterate, does it make them immune from criticism.

HARRY GERSH

Tuckahoe, New York

A Subscriber in the Negev

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

Perhaps it might be of interest to you how your magazine is received by a group of some one hundred and eighty American *halutzim* in this remote corner of Israel's southern desert. Unfortunately, I am the only one who has a subscription to your magazine. This presents us with an almost insurmountable problem, since most everybody wants to read it and it takes months before it makes the rounds, if it does so at all. However, if and when somebody gets hold of it he is usually quite satisfied. Though we are quite isolated here we still maintain a strong interest in those fields you cover so well, i.e., Jewish affairs, world affairs, and social science. And though we have decided that our place as Jews is here in Israel, we nevertheless follow with avid interest developments in the American Jewish community, since whatever our convictions might be about the value or permanence of Jewish life in the *Golah*, we still realize that the fate of American Jewry has an important effect on us personally and on Israel in general. Your level of material makes many of us feel that your magazine ranks as the finest of its type in America today. From personal observation I might add that your stuff on Israel, especially

Hal Lehrman, is excellent. I would especially like to praise his fine job on the problems of American emigration to Israel and why it hasn't been as large or successful as it should have been.

If it is possible, you might ask him to drop down here the next time he is in Israel. We would certainly like to talk to him, and it is barely possible that we might prove of interest to him.

NECHEMIA MEYERS

Kvutzat Urimi

Doar Ha-Negev, Israel

Footnote on a Cause Célèbre

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

The article in your March issue by Irving Kristol, "Civil Liberties, 1952—A Study in Confusion," makes reference to a Mrs. Shura Lewis, whose talk in a Washington high school about utopian aspects of the Soviet Union aroused some controversy and caused Professor Commager to cite the attacks on Mrs. Lewis as an example of anti-Communist hysteria. Professor Commager is also quoted as saying that Mrs. Lewis "said nothing that any normal person could find objectionable."

There is no need to discuss whether or not the furor over Mrs. Lewis's speech imperils civil liberties in America. Mr. Kristol has handled this matter well. I merely want to cite a statement from a report recently published by the Committee on Un-American Activities entitled "The Shameful Years: Thirty Years of Soviet Espionage in the United States." On page 18, there is a reference to Mrs. Lewis that reads as follows:

"Mrs. (Hermann H.) Habicht, since her arrival in the United States, has been an ardent apologist for the Soviet Union and has persistently curried favor with Soviet representatives. . . . Mrs. Habicht also has been closely associated with Shura Lewis, a Russian national in this country through her marriage to an American citizen.

"Mrs. Lewis is known to have been in contact with Mr. and Mrs. Vassili Zubilin, both of whom have been identified to the committee as agents of the NKVD. In fact, investigation has disclosed that at the time of the contact Vassili Zubilin was directing NKVD operations in the United States.

"Mrs. Lewis also received considerable publicity at a later date when she addressed a high school group in Washington, D.C. and extolled the merits of Soviet Russia as compared to the United States."

ARNOLD BEICHMAN

New York City